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ABSTRACT

This pamphlet reviews five recent research studies that focus on various key aspects of school climate, a popular metaphor that is difficult to define, measure, or manipulate. "The Search for School Climate: A Review of the Research," by Carolyn Anderson, surveys the full scope of school climate literature, concluding with a summary of the common findings that these diverse studies have yielded. "Elementary School Self-Improvement through Social Climate Enhancement," by Peter Coleman, emphasizes the importance of parent and teacher perceptions in school climate assessment and improvement. Carol Ann West's study addresses the "Effects of School Climate and School Social Structure on Student Academic Achievement in Selected Urban Elementary Schools." The last two studies reviewed are "Elementary School Climate: A Revision of the OCDQ" (Organizational Climate Description Questionnaire) by Wayne K. Hoy and Sharon Clover, and "Using Organizational Development to Improve School Climate" by Gary D. and Denise C. Gottfredson. (TE)

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School Climate

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RESEARCH roundup

Volume 4, Number 2 February 1988

School Climate

Thomas I. Ellis

School climate" is a popular metaphor for a complex phenomenon that is easy to perceive but formidably difficult to define, measure, or manipulate. It refers to the aggregate of indicators, both subjective and objective, that convey the overall feeling or impression one gets about a school.

A school with a good "climate" is seen as having enthusiastic, hard-working students; a dedicated, cooperative teaching staff; and a pervasive sense of trust, mutual respect, and support between teachers and administrators. A school with a climate perceived as poor is likely to be characterized by alienated students; teachers who are hostile or indifferent to the students and to one another; and a principal who is out of touch with teachers' needs, arbitrary and dictatorial in decisions, and resistant to any change in the status quo.

In those terms, the difference between a positive school climate and a negative one is easy to grasp. By any standard—student achievement, parent satisfaction, student attrition, teacher turnover, whatever—there is a close connection between a school's climate and success in carrying out its mission.

What is not so clear, however, is how to determine where the climate of a particular school lies on the continuum between "good" and "poor," or what can be done to bring about lasting improvement.

To assess a school's climate, it is first of all necessary to identify those variables that most accurately reflect what the situation is and how they can best be measured. And to improve the school's climate, it is necessary to know something about the complex interactions that affect the situation, to recognize who is in the best position to alter existing patterns, and to determine where to start in launching the change process.

Five recent studies provide useful guidance in these matters. The first, by Carolyn Anderson, is a cohesive and insightful survey of the full scope of school climate literature, starting with the various conflicting opinions about the worth and validity of the "climate" construct as an object of research, and concluding with a summary of the common findings that these diverse studies have yielded.

The second, Peter Coleman's study of nine schools in British Columbia, emphasizes the importance of parent and teacher perceptions both in ascertaining the climate of a school and in determining how to improve it. Then Carol Ann West focuses on urban schools in a study that shows how school climate factors can affect the academic success of disadvantaged children in learning basic skills. In the last two studies, one by Wayne Hoy and Sharon Clover, and the other by Gary and Denise Gottfredson, the emphasis shifts to practical strategies for improving school climate.

Despite widespread disagreement about how to define or measure the amorphous "school climate" concept, a consensus has emerged among researchers that the person most influential in determining or altering the climate of a school is the principal. In one study after another, a "good" school climate—however defined—is correlated with teachers' perceptions that they can trust their principal, that they can get help when they need it, that they are respected as professionals, and that they are involved in the decisions that affect them the most. Conversely, in schools with pervasive problems, communication between teachers and administrators is deficient and the level of rapport is low. Clearly, the principal holds the key to creating the kind of climate that will raise the morale, commitment, and achievement of teachers and students alike.

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1 **Anderson, Carolyn S.** "The Search for School Climate: A Review of the Research." *Review of Educational Research* 52, 3 (Fall 1982): 368-420. EJ 273 690.

Those who explore the research on school climate are likely to be overwhelmed by the bewildering variety of assumptions, instruments, concepts, and methods that researchers have used to explore the wide range of variables involved. In this regard, Anderson's comprehensive and well-organized review is an ideal starting point for administrators who seek a lucid and orderly assessment of the key issues, controversies, and findings of the school climate literature.

Anderson begins by reviewing the rationale for the "climate" concept and the controversies over its validity and desirability as a focus for research. She traces the methodologies used in current examinations of the concept back to early studies of the organizational environment found in business, college, and classroom settings. Then she lists the major instruments for measuring school climate, along with their antecedents and derivatives, and relates the debate about school climate to differences among researchers in theory base, variables (and their hypothesized interrelationships), choices among units of measurement, and validity of subjective and qualitative data.

Despite these differences, certain common conclusions about school climate do emerge from the literature—recurrent factors that are perceived (by participants or outsiders) as shaping a school's climate and that are consistently associated with positive outcomes. Anderson identifies four categories of variables: ecology (physical variables), milieu (characteristics of individuals in the school), social system (patterns or rules of operating and interacting in the school), and culture (variables that reflect norms, belief systems, values, cognitive structures, and attitudes of persons within the school).

Of all these variables, the ones that were most consistently correlated with a good school climate and high student achievement were those pertaining to rapport between administrators and teachers. Also important were staff participation in decision-making, good communication (characterized by trust, respect, and care), and strong administrative leadership in instruction. These findings, gleaned from a broad array of research studies, suggest that principals can play a decisive role in improving their school climate by providing more encouragement and support for their teaching staff and by seeking the staff's advice and participation in decision-making.

2 **Coleman, Peter.** *Elementary School Self-Improvement Through Social Climate Enhancement.* Vancouver, BC: Simon Fraser University, August 1984. 179 pages. ED 251 961.

Using Wilbur Brookover's conception of school climate as "the composite of norms, expectations, and beliefs which characterize the school social system as perceived by members of the social system," this two-year project was an attempt to improve social climate in nine diverse elementary schools in urban, suburban, and rural locations in British Columbia. The project was guided by four principles: (1) schools should be responsive to their clients' preferences; (2) precise descriptions of school climate require multiple measures with convergent validation; (3) the principal's leadership is critical for effective schools; and (4) efforts to change schools need to be school-based and school-specific. During the project, wide-ranging surveys of both parents and teachers were conducted at each of the nine schools to identify components of school climate that parents and teachers regarded as most important and to discover consistent differences in parents' and teachers' perceptions of the principal's role. Survey data were transformed into ratings on each of six factors—four perceived by parents (principal activities and style; achievement, challenge, and motivation; warm, welcoming environment; and social contact), and two by teachers (teacher-principal collegiality and solving instructional problems).

The findings suggest that efforts to implement educational change are chiefly affected by three preconditions: school focus, school autonomy, and staff development.

- *School focus* denotes the view that the school itself is the vital unit of analysis and thus more important for change efforts than individuals or school districts.
- *School autonomy* means the freedom from bureaucratic pressures that provides, but does not guarantee, the opportunity for innovation and excellence. In this respect, Coleman's study "clearly supports the view that the principal is critical to school

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quality, for both parents and teachers."

- *Staff development* reaches out to the proposition that teacher participation—including collegiality and continuous improvement—is essential to school self-renewal and collaborative planning for change. A principal can best cultivate this kind of cooperative growth, Coleman says, by providing ample time for teachers to participate in planning and problem solving and by using professional development time for collegial activities at the school level.

3 West, Carol Ann.. "Effects of School Climate and School Social Structure on Student Academic Achievement in Selected Urban Elementary Schools." *Journal of Negro Education* 54, 3 (1985): 451-61. EJ 320 608.

One of the most intractible educational problems in recent years has been the failure of urban public schools to educate children effectively in basic skills. Test scores have shown that the disparity in achievement levels between urban and suburban students tends to widen as the students advance from elementary to high school. Yet some urban schools are more successful than others in counteracting this trend; this study was undertaken to ascertain the reasons for the success of such schools.

Wilbur Brookover's School Climate Questionnaire was filled out by 147 third- and sixth-grade teachers at 27 elementary schools in Paterson, New Jersey. All these schools have a majority of low-income and minority students, but they vary widely in achievement ratings. The survey data were then correlated with student scores on New Jersey Minimum Basic Skills Test at these schools. The data having been corrected and correlated, several statistical procedures were used to determine the significance of the relationship between teachers' perceptions of school academic climate, the social composition of the school (including race and socioeconomic background and the school social structure), and student academic achievement.

Higher achievement scores in reading and math among disadvantaged students were consistently found in schools with strong instructional leadership by the principal, a schoolwide emphasis on basic skills, parental involvement, and an overall atmosphere of high expectations. On the basis of these aggregate findings, West suggests that schools with a "strong commitment to basic skills instruction and...a supportive administrator who sets high standards and provides instructional leadership can in fact do much to improve learning outcomes for children in urban elementary schools." Obviously, in tackling the thorny problem of achievement lag among minority and low-income students, a healthy school climate can make a crucial difference.

4 Hoy, Wayne K., and Sharon I.R. Clover. "Elementary School Climate: A Revision of the OCDQ." *Educational Administration Quarterly* 22, 1 (Winter 1986): 93-110. EJ 337 441.

The Organizational Climate Description Questionnaire (OCDQ), developed by Halpin and Croft in 1962, is the best known conceptualization and measure of school climate. Despite its popularity, Hoy and Clover felt that it had basic weaknesses in design and logic. Thus they undertook a revision of the OCDQ, to produce an instrument of superior clarity and utility.

Hoy and Clover define *climate* as "a set of measurable properties of the work environment of teachers and administrators based on their collective perceptions." It is strongly influenced by the leadership practices of principals, they say, it sets the stage for the normative and behavioral structure of the informal organization, and it affects motivation of students and teachers alike.

The eight dimensions of the original OCDQ were found to be inadequate on grounds that they failed to provide meaningful gradations in climate ratings of schools that fell between the polarities of "open" and "closed." Hoy and Clover replaced them with only six dimensions—three bearing on the principal's behavior (supportive, directive, or restrictive), and three relating to the behavior of the teachers (collegial, intimate, or disengaged). In place of Halpin and Croft's bipolar (open-closed) classification, the revised OCDQ illuminates four contrasting types of school climate, based on the relative candor and responsiveness of both principals and teachers: *open* (supportive principals and collegial or intimate teachers), *engaged* (restrictive or directive principals and collegial or intimate teachers), *disengaged* (supportive principals and disengaged teachers), and *closed* (restrictive principals and disengaged teachers).

The authors say a pilot test revealed this schema to be more useful and accurate in characterizing school climates than that of the original OCDQ, since the middle gradations between "open" and "closed"—ambiguous in the original instrument—were clearly associated in Hoy and Clover's revision with perceived patterns of behavior on the part either of the teachers or of the principal.

5 Gottfredson, Gary D., and Denise C. Gottfredson. *Using Organizational Development to Improve School Climate*. Baltimore: Center for Research on Elementary and Middle Schools, Johns Hopkins University, July 1987. 24 pages.

As the authors of this report

wistfully observe, "most educational researchers develop, pilot, and evaluate techniques [for school climate improvement] in schools where it is easiest to conduct their research." But what about schools in serious trouble—inner-city schools plagued by violence, low student and teacher morale, high teacher turnover, and mutual mistrust resulting from (and perpetuating) poor communication among administrators, teachers, and students?

The Gottfredsons chose such a school for a test run of their Program Development Evaluation (PDE) method, an integrated approach (based on organizational development theory) to analyzing organizational problems and intervening to solve them. In applying the PDE method, researchers collaborate with school personnel to set measurable school improvement objectives, select interventions to achieve these goals, identify obstacles to implementation, and develop benchmarks to monitor progress in coping with these obstacles. According to the authors, PDE surpasses similar school improvement methods in its detailed attention to the obstacles that commonly thwart implementation.

The obstacles that the researchers encountered at this school included a tendency by administrators to cover up problems rather than attempt to solve them, and a consequent lack of teacher trust in the administration's willingness to follow through with its part of any agreement. Researchers also had to cope with a self-validating "yes, but" problem marked by a litany of objections from teachers and administrators alike that the new procedures would be impossible to apply.

The researchers addressed this situation first by reaching agreement among staff and administrators on what practices would be desirable regardless of obstacles. Then, in a separate step, all concerned were called upon to examine the perceived obstacles and develop specific plans to overcome them. The researchers noted that by limiting the range of discussion to a single issue at a time, they were able to keep the "yes, but" problem under control; also, by getting teachers and administrators to collaborate in problem solving, channels of communication and trust were restored as they collectively developed a set of benchmarks to signal levels of progress. The resulting policies and plans were written down and disseminated throughout the school, along with decisions about who was to take what specific steps, and when.

By the end of the three-year project, teams at this inner-city school had implemented major innovations in classroom management and instruction, had revised schoolwide discipline policies and practices, and had launched several innovations aimed at increasing parent involvement and decreasing student alienation. Although the school still has a long way to go, indicators of teacher morale have risen as the staff's perceptions of the administration have become more positive; meanwhile the school has become measurably safer and more orderly.

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